

# Outdoor Adventure Camps: Personal Development through Challenge

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**T**he attributes and skills required for a successful criminal career are numerous and are acquired and developed through a mixture of personality, contacts and background. Essential ingredients would include initiative, cooperation, resourcefulness, risk-taking, trust, group-cohesiveness and physical fitness; proficiency in these areas is inversely proportional to the likelihood of apprehension. However, only a small percentage of offenders make good criminals, for most of their acts are petty, spontaneous, ill-considered (Murray & Borowski 1986) and quite often made under the influence of drugs or alcohol and driven by a sense of desperation or despair (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1987).

Many programs, particularly for youth, make use of activities or outdoor adventure as a means of developing personal attributes such as self-esteem, confidence, responsibility and trust in a positive way, and building on individuals' achievements and success to encourage further development. This is a major role of sport and recreation in schools and youth clubs (Seagrave & Chu 1978), but it has been shown that some individuals do not respond to the competitive and over organised way in which many sports and activities are presented (Yiannakis 1980, p. 848). Such individuals do not respect the rules per se and prefer to establish their own parameters of behaviour. 'Risk-taking is likely to appeal more to youth with pre-delinquent tendencies and it is for this reason that challenging adventure programs of the Outward-Bound type are likely to appeal more to the non-conforming individual than organised, formal sports of the interscholastic type' (Donnelly 1981).

Many such activities can be set up and organised within local neighbourhoods without great cost. Inner city and suburban environments provide numerous opportunities for challenge and adventure for kids but most of these are withheld by virtue of such considerations as private property, security, public safety or public liability. Ironically the search for such adventure and excitement by urban adolescents often leads to criminal conviction and intervention by the very agencies that advocate adventure training. With a little thought and understanding 'Out-of-bounds' could become 'Urban Outward-Bound'. An example of such thinking is the opening up of the canal system that flows through many East London housing estates in the United Kingdom. These stretches of water were surrounded by barbed wire and high fencing years ago, yet each school holiday the obituary columns of the local newspaper were full of the names of young children who had drowned in the local waterways. The local response was to promote water-based youth clubs. Water safety and learn-to-swim campaigns were organised and regular supervised access

was allowed on the water. In a few years what had once been an open sewer and dumping ground was transformed into an open public amenity and thanks to the community, the incidence of drowning decreased markedly.

However, there are many adolescents who are too alienated from their own community to participate in such initiatives and these are most often the ones who resent such programs and vandalise them. For them risk-taking and challenge are a way of life. It is for these reasons that when such individuals fall within the jurisdiction of probation and welfare agencies, outdoor activities have been considered a useful medium to initiate trust, confidence and hopefully induce change.

The use of outdoor activities is based on the philosophies of the German educationalist, Dr Kurt Hahn, an exile of Nazi Germany who settled in the United Kingdom prior to the Second World War. During this war there was concern about the large numbers of young seamen who died with little struggle when forced to abandon ship whereas older, more experienced sailors were able to survive. As a response to this he established the first Outward-Bound School using adventure and challenge as a basis for learning. Outdoor activities fall into two categories.

### **Extended Outward-Bound Courses**

These courses are strenuous, physically and mentally demanding and of extended duration usually four to five weeks. Generally referrals are made through schools and colleges as part of an ongoing training program, but increasingly such camps are used as an alternative or adjunct to institutional care or Youth Detention Centres. Research indicates that such camps 'are a desirable alternative to traditional institutional care' (Kelly & Baer 1969). Background variables such as use of first court appearance, presence of both parents in the home or first institutionalisation type of offence were important conditions affecting recidivism. It was also found that the program was more successful for delinquents who stole material goods or cars. Youths who were responding to an 'adolescent crisis' rather than to a character defect appeared to profit most (Cardwell 1978). Most researchers have found Outward-Bound Courses have had a positive effect on recidivism rates (Baer, Jacobs & Carr 1975; Cytrnbaum & Kerr 1975). But there are other problems generated by such intensive courses namely, such intervention does not change the reward structure in the school and communities to which participants return, and changing expectations without changing realities may arouse frustration and resentment (Partington 1977).

Such programs have become the general 'model' for all outdoor activity programs and as such have caused an image problem. They are seen as something between punishment and social engineering and where offenders are concerned, sometimes appear to be a final 'desperate' solution, the consequences of failure being inevitable incarceration. Such an image has been reinforced by initiatives such as the short, sharp shock program in the United Kingdom. Inner city kids, many without a home, and often undernourished, would be referred to such programs as a sentencing option from the courts. They would return well-fed, super-fit, confident, assertive and ready to take up their place at the top of the neighbourhood pack. As one writer to *The Times* put it, 'The community would have been better served if they were sentenced to complete a course in basket-weaving or knocking the skins off rice puddings'.

Compulsory courses, as part of sentencing options, are less psychologically damaging than incarceration and this is perhaps a reason for their perceived success.

### **Voluntary, Integrated Short-Term Courses**

Outdoor activity camps for a range of adolescents, used in conjunction with community activities and used purely as an extension to ongoing community programs are also popular. In Tasmania, Project Hahn has been operating for a number of years in this way.

*Project Hahn*

This program is based on the premise that self-confidence, self-worth and personal autonomy are built on personal success and achievement. Outdoor pursuits are the vehicles used because success and achievement are immediate and can have high personal impact.

Clients are largely young disadvantaged Tasmanians including young offenders, state wards, school-refused and refusers as well as the long-term unemployed. The latter category make up the largest percentage of the client group. Numerous studies have shown how young people's morale and self-respect is eroded, often resulting in their progressive alienation from society.

One major result of long-term unemployment is that, at a critical stage of their development, these young people have limited opportunity to either demonstrate their personal capabilities or to develop them, making it very difficult to maintain a positive self-image.

An important point here is to acknowledge the heterogeneity of youths at risk rather than singling out and attempting to treat a small proportion of them. It recognises that the difference between being a young offender or not is often only a legally imposed distinction. Youths are recruited from a range of organisations and venues, as well as by direct advertising in the media and in the neighbourhood.

Personal development depends on the interaction between the individual, group and setting. What is controlled in Project Hahn is the setting. A perusal of the literature related to challenge programs could lead one to believe that the outdoor pursuits environment will inevitably provide such a setting. This is far from the truth—any setting has potential to enhance personal growth but also has the potential to destroy or retard that same growth.

Some of the principles to be kept in mind when designing any challenge setting, whatever the environment, are described below by two of the originators of Project Hahn, M. Wells and M. Freestone.

*Individual needs*

The challenge setting should increase the individual's self-understanding and develop such personal competencies as self-sufficiency, self-reliance, self-respect and self-confidence. The term self is used in this context not as in the Narcissus myth but in the sense of the real inner being. This point is important because individuals must understand the difference between love of true self and the self-edification of an image or ideal self which unfortunately is the more common usage of the term.

In the same way, the need for individuals to feel that they are in control of their actions is important. The feeling that success is the result of your effort and that your destiny is largely under your control is central to a feeling of autonomy. (Autonomy is a much better description of this human need than the oft used term 'power' which implies control over others rather than self.)

Communication between leaders and the group should be by negotiation whenever possible, although it should be well understood that at times where the safety of group or individuals is threatened then direction should obviously be heeded.

*Group needs*

Although we are essentially interested in individual needs, the needs and safety of the group obviously cannot be overlooked. An environment which allows an individual to become aware of their own worth will also allow them to learn about the needs and abilities of others. Such a setting will also illustrate that individual goals and safety can often only be achieved through cooperation as opposed to competition. That is, the degree to which I achieve my goal is dependent on the degree to which other group members do also.

On the other hand, competition essentially means that one individual achieves their goal at the expense of other members of the group. The challenge setting should demonstrate human interdependence. Inner-directed effort improves self, outer-directed effort serves only the purpose of proving ourselves or seeking approval and is a sure sign of a lack of self-respect. Leaders should endeavour to develop shared tasks and activities with the group to which participants will have a commitment.

### *Challenge and safety*

Obviously challenge and risk are an essential part of the setting. What is being provided is a real life adventure rather than an artificial one (for example, shopping spree, eating binge or other substance abuse). Such a challenge will not always be physical for every individual. Where one participant's challenge may be abseiling down a cliff, for another, such a task may prove relatively easy and the challenge may rest in coming to grips with living in the group, communicating and forming relationships.

While some of an individual's learning will stem directly from their physical and mental effort, other will come during periods of reflection and relaxation. While engaged in mental effort one is likely to be logical, rational and deductive. During relaxation thought is more likely to be inductive, non-logical and result in personal revelations regarding self. The period around the fire in the evening is ideal for such reflection and it is best not to structure this period of time. Individuals wishing to withdraw from activity for short periods should not be discouraged for the same reason. It is essential that the setting be real, but isolated from the stresses of the individual's everyday environment. This provides the social safety required since learning comes not only from successes but also mistakes. In this regard it has been found that the length of the course is critical. It is unlikely that all participants will be able to leave their 'normal environments' psychologically and emotionally in less than three or four days. This period of time is used for building up basic skills required to undertake the challenge later. Given the constraints of time, finances and individual commitments, a period of eight to twelve days has proved successful. Most courses are conducted over ten days. This social safety can also result from participants being chosen from a diversity of locations and backgrounds, both male and female. In this way participants are more able to make mistakes or openly show fear and other emotions without great social cost.

In endeavours of this nature, physical safety is of utmost concern. It is well known that each individual has a different perception of danger and that there is an optimum level of risk or challenge for each individual, performance at less than that level results in boredom, beyond, in anxiety and fear. Instructors must be sensitive to such individual variations and design activities accordingly.

### *Involvement of probation and parole*

The participation of probation and parole officers was requested from the coordinator of Project Hahn in 1985 after their own leaders had found problems in earlier courses coping with the behaviour displayed by a number of their participants. It was hoped that our skills in dealing with this population could be assimilated into their program. In exchange for our services, Project Hahn reduced the fees for a select number of probationers to minimum cost. Since this time forty probationers have been referred and sponsored by the Tasmanian Law Department and two probation officers have also participated. Challenge courses have been designed around six components:

- Introductory day or half-day session in the locality of clients. Often a local river or rock face is chosen which gives participants a taste for the challenge whilst at the same time showing the potential of their home environment.
- On the course itself—basic skills training, team building, assessment of individual and group capabilities.

- Development—a wide range of activities tailored to meet the capabilities and needs of the group.
- Consolidation—a final activity to extend previous skills and experiences, where participants will be expected to take as much responsibility as possible for planning and implementing their own project (expedition).
- Review—group evaluation of experiences and personal self-assessment.
- Follow-up after the course. Day activity with the same group after three or four weeks to consolidate friendships, reinforce lessons learnt and gain feedback from participants. Where possible and where appropriate this is shared with probation and welfare and CYSS workers as a basis for future casework.

These six components take into account the various stages through which a group progresses in an experiential learning cycle.

A group's development has five stages:

#### STAGE 1: DEPENDENCE

Group members are polite  
 They avoid conflict  
 They are concerned about being accepted or rejected  
 Their orientation is towards task.

#### STAGE 2: CONFLICT

Group members become involved in conflict because of concerns about status, power and organisation. The pecking order and scapegoats become obvious.

#### STAGE 3: COHESION

There is more cohesion between members as there is more affection, open-mindedness and a willingness to share. The group is motivated to learn to problem solve as they all trust each other. Sometimes the pressure to conform to the group may detract from the task at hand.

#### STAGE 4: AUTONOMY

There is a supportive group climate. Concerns about interdependence and independence are resolved so that both can occur along with the dominant need to solve problems.

#### STAGE 5 SEPARATION

Group cohesion can break down as members are concerned about disengaging from relationships. This separation or loss needs to be addressed by debriefing or participants can regress to conflict stage and exhibit bizarre behaviour (Watson, Vallee, Mulford 1981).

*Operation of Project Hahn*

Over the five year period a total of 520 young people have attended Project Hahn courses, approximately seventy-five of these have been female. During this time the project has developed through three different phases of management and operation as a response to funding short-falls and the continuing difficulty of making successful referrals. It is estimated that for every male that actually participates in a course three will have been approached, shown interest in attending but dropped out prior to the course's commencement. For females the figure would be closer to five. Thus a considerable amount of the organisation's resources have to be allocated to pre-course recruitment in the form of advertising, public speaking and networking to maintain the pool of prospective clients to ensure that courses actually run. This has been a crucial issue in many challenge courses, but has received little attention in research or in the literature.

### *Direct approach*

Initially Project Hahn employed a full-time female community worker to provide information and organise recruitment. Community groups such as CYSS centres, youth shelters, colleges and youth clubs were canvassed. It soon became apparent that such an approach was insufficient to gain commitment from young people to make a decision that involved such apparent risk to themselves and self-exposure. They needed much more advice, support and reassurance than one person could provide.

### *Direct networking*

The idea of networking was introduced where workers in shelters, CYSS groups, welfare and probation offices were invited to become directly involved in designing, organising and participating in courses themselves. The concept of 'training the trainers' was seen as a way of providing continuity, gaining feedback as well as providing a support and encouragement role in recruiting within local communities. Project Hahn staff were thus able to devote their energy and talents to actually running the courses and providing introductory and follow-up sessions. This phase produced a flexible, yet independent, organisation that was sufficiently 'in tune' with agency and client needs but it still suffered from inadequate and uncertain funding. Additionally the demands of agency support still resulted in staff burn-out.

### *Agency networking*

It became apparent that there was sufficient support and interest of staff in the relevant agencies (education, welfare and probation and parole) so that they could be relied on to fill the recruitment role. This has been successful only in so far as workers within those agencies have had the enthusiasm and time to maintain the network. Hopefully this arrangement will be more formalised in the future when this role is coordinated by the Department for Youth, Sport and Recreation.

### *Involvement of probation clients*

Clientele of the Probation and Parole Service can be divided into three groups:

- first and minor offenders;
- repeat offenders who have remained within the jurisdiction of community based corrections; and
- recurrent offenders with custodial experience.

The first group, should they not re-offend, have a high chance of successfully completing a probation period without the need for much intervention, other than regular contact and support. Repeat offenders are the main target group; those who participate in

Project Hahn's activities do not necessarily immediately stop offending but it has been found that for the majority their offences become less serious and they also show an increased propensity to respond to other aspects of supervision, that is, they are more willing to attend relevant classes such as literacy, job-training, alcohol and drug treatment. Recurrent offenders have not been given the opportunity to attend Project Hahn courses. In the future it is visualised that special courses will be set-up to suit their particular needs (Mason & Wilson 1988).

Participation by probationers has always been voluntary. Even on a course they are free to leave should they wish to do so. It has been found that referrals from any agency are successfully made when trust and contact between client and referring worker has been built up over time. On average this contact would last around nine months. To many young people the idea of committing themselves to such a challenge course requires reassurance and feedback from others and the knowledge that they are making a positive step. This process requires sensitivity and knowledge from the referring workers who preferably should have a first-hand knowledge of what is involved.

Those referred through Probation to Project Hahn courses are more than likely to have an undue influence upon the chemistry of the group. Offenders are predominantly male, they are likely to have a reduced sense of commitment and responsibility but most importantly to manifest extremes of personality type ranging from severely withdrawn to extreme extrovert. In order that the group as a whole is not dominated by such individuals it is important that probation officers making referrals have the insight and knowledge of personality types to know whether individuals will benefit from the course and similarly whether the course has anything to offer them.

In a job where it seems we have very little to offer our clients it is easy to jump at the chance of making a referral to Project Hahn purely to be seen as 'doing something positive'. Similarly the temptation to refer purely because someone is having a bad time at home, or has accommodation problems or hassles with the police or girlfriend/boyfriend can be overwhelming but such factors are not sufficient reasons to send someone off into the bush for ten days. The client himself will be the first to recognise such action as escapism and will react on the course accordingly.

There is a high degree of self-selection on entering the courses and therefore measurement of success is not really feasible. Voluntary participation indicates that individuals are ready to make that step and therefore the outcome is most likely to be successful. Participants are not only likely to complete the course but to assimilate effectively its lessons into everyday living. Feedback both from probationers and their supervising probation officers is 75 per cent positive. It is noticeable that for participants there is a higher rate of successful completion of probation orders without further conviction and also that a satisfactory success rating given to probationers on completion of their supervision order is higher than the average—60 per cent compared with 50 per cent (Corrective Services Division 1988). Much of the evidence of success is anecdotal and because total numbers are small it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the effects of the program on individual participants. There are, however, a couple of issues that have emerged from our experience that may be of interest.

### *Composition of groups*

The issue of mixed or single sex groups is a hotly debated topic; generally mixed groups are less competitive, more responsible but there is a difficulty in recruiting girls. Girls reluctant to participate can be a result of fearing 'put-downs' by boys like those that occur in the classroom. These feelings of inferiority are shown by either not participating at all, or by

taking a passive role in activities. This often occurs even when girls are more skilled and experienced than most of the boys they are with (Kuchel 1987).

Project Hahn has employed a female leader for the past three years which had the effect of successfully recruiting more female participants; there has been a 20 per cent female participation rate from probation referrals where females represent only 15 per cent of total caseload. It has also been noticeable that even in groups that have all male participation a female leader significantly reduces the competitive and potentially unruly behaviour that all male groups tend to foster. Two very successful 'all female' groups have been organised and run where the level of participation, involvement and feedback has been very high. It was noticeable, however that it was extremely difficult to recruit girls who were on probation orders on to such courses. They preferred the idea of a mixed group.

### *Follow-up*

Offenders under welfare, probation supervision have an average length of supervision of twelve months. This amount of time allows for adequate build-up of trust for introductory day activities as well as follow-up activities after participation in an adventure course. Such follow-up may take the form of a separate activity or participation and assistance in helping out new participants in the next introductory session. In this skills and expertise as well as self-confidence can be reinforced and feedback imparted to prospective participants.

To summarise, some of the fundamental lessons which have been learnt over the last three years are:

- groups with a mix of gender social, economic, cultural and geographic backgrounds are more effective than homogeneous groupings;
- the value of female leaders in activities;
- the value of continuous and sensitive communication and negotiation between leaders and participants and between participants themselves;
- feasible yet challenging activities that are within the capabilities of participants (to the outdoor pursuit enthusiast the degree of risk/challenge often seems incredibly low);
- development of course content with the participants' results in greater commitment;
- importance of progress. Activities are a means not an end. The aim is not to turn out bushwalkers or rock climbers. If an individual wishes to continue an activity it is merely a bonus;
- the inability of decision makers to see the program as a personal development program as opposed to a recreation program and the tendency to see such activity as a potential replacement for employment (that is a form of entertainment or social control);
- the importance of good role models as instructors;
- interpersonal skills are the number one requirement of staff. Outdoor pursuits skills are of secondary consideration;

- as offender rehabilitation is 'negatively geared' as a political issue there is a tendency and a temptation to sell such program to the community as a form of punishment to justify the public expenditure involved; and
- instructor 'burn-out' has been a problem. Being away from home for long periods in an incredibly demanding environment combined with the uncertainty of continued funding, has resulted in the turnover of three sets of staff.

## Conclusion

Although total numbers of probationers referred to outdoor adventure courses in Tasmania is small there is sufficient encouraging evidence to suggest that a positive impact on their own development has been made. There is no simple measure to quantify this, measurement of recidivism rates, for instance, is fraught with difficulties and ultimately over-simplifies the issue. Anecdotal evidence indicates that in the short term changes have been made which in the long term may lead to less offending behaviour. However, such measurement issues have not been considered so far in Tasmania, particularly when it is remembered that no positive evidence has yet been produced to suggest that the imposition of probation supervision has had any discernible effect on altering offending behaviour.

To use the earlier analogy of the seafarers, we may not be teaching people to be competent swimmers but at least we are helping them to work out for themselves in which direction the tide is flowing.

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